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English Language Proficiency of Preschool teachers in Kerala: A survey

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Abstract

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In a multilingual country like India, where educational system follows a Three Language Formula (TLF), the literacy success of children rely on the proficiency of teachers in their second language. The current study aims to assess the English language proficiency of preschool teachers of Kerala state. Results revealed that among the four domains, all the participant scored poorly for speaking and listening as compared to reading and writing. Majority of researchers scored 3 or less than 3 for all domains. Given that teacher's proficiency in English language has a significant effect on children's literacy development, policy makers, researchers and administrators can plan for training programs for professional development of teachers to ensure the quality preschool instruction.

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Bilingual education is a major area of research in the field of education across the world over the last few decades. Children who are exposed to native language at home and in their community from birth, and to a second language between the ages of 3-5 years (i.e. when they enter preschool) are referred as early sequential bilingual language learners. The term *English Language Learners* (ELLs) is used to refer children who are native speaker of a particular language but learn to read and write English language. Bilingual education refers to the learning of two languages in the educational settings which depends on variables like native/regional language of the child, medium of instruction, and linguistic structure and script features of two languages (Cazden & Snow, 1990). As the second language (L2, English) learning generally occurs in school, the exposure and training which the child receives at school are very vital to the acquisition of second language. Than the parents and peer group, teachers provide a better model and environment for the acquisition of second language. Hence proficiency of teachers in the second language is very important in the learning of second language in children.

It has been evidenced by many researches that teachers' proficiency is related to the classroom practices and the performance of children. Nell and Muller (2010) reported that teachers are responsible for the inadequate language input due to their own poor proficiency in L2. The teacher should talk on a learner's level of comprehension, that is, the learner should be able to understand what the teacher is saying (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). To speak at that level the teacher should be proficient in the respective language. While teachers are the models for children at younger ages especially to learn L2, teachers' own limited L2 knowledge and poor usage are transferred to the learners (Stander, 2001). These findings were supported by Nel and Muller (2010) by evaluating the errors exhibited by students of less proficient teachers. They suggested that limited L2 proficiency had a negative impact on children's L2 acquisition. Poor L2 learning in children can be attributed to poor language teaching by teachers who themselves are less proficient in English language (Pretorious, 2002). In sum, language proficiency of teachers influences children's language acquisition. In addition, language proficiency has a significant impact on teachers confidence and self esteem particularly Non Native English Speaking (NNES)Teacher. Language competence has been rated as the most essential characteristic of a good teacher (Lange, 1990). As shown by research, perceived



language proficiency is an important issue for NNES teachers and has an impact on their professional self-esteem and confidence (Kamhi-Stein & Mahboob, 2005; Medgyes, 1994; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999).

Research evidences that oral language facilitates literacy acquisition (Teale & Sulby, 1991; Whithurst & Lonigan, 1998) as oral language forms the foundation for written language skills. Also, it has been asserted by many researchers that children from literacy rich environment outperform children with poor environment (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Wolf, Dickinson, 1993). The quality of input, amount of interaction with teachers, oral narrative skills, shared book reading etc. influences literacy acquisition. Preschools mainly emphasize on building language skills and pre-literacy skills, through story telling, shared book reading etc. Hence, preschool teachers play a critical role in providing language input and models for their students. Second language acquisition occurs faster at younger age, therefore, proficiency of preschool teachers in their second language plays a crucial role in the L2 acquisition of children. While, children from different socioeconomic background receiving varying second language input, teachers might overcome this discrepancy by providing a better quality of language input.

Indian scenario

In a multilingual and multicultural country like India the formation and implementation of language policies in education is a challenge. Earlier the language policies ensured the use of native language/mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the elementary school. Second language will be introduced to the child at a later stage. But, now a day's most parents from rural as well as urban area prefer to send their children to English medium schools wherein English is the first language. Therefore nowadays implementation of educational policies and practices are challenging in Indian context. All India Council for Education (AICE) and National Council of Education (NCE) recommend adoption of a three language formula. With the Three Language Formula (TLF), it has been recommended to provide education in regional language, English and Hindi in non -Hindi states, and any other modern Indian language in Hindi speaking states. But the medium of instruction differs at different levels of education. At the level of higher education the medium of instruction is limited to one language and the most preferred language is English. National Curriculum Framework (2005) insists on using mother tongue as the medium of instruction at all levels or at least till the end of elementary stage. In short, the review reveals that, over last few decades modifications done in the educational practices were focused on curricular framework, , language(s) of instruction, educational policies, teaching and evaluation strategies and strengthening of teacher training programs.

These challenges of bilingual education can be successfully met by providing suitable measures to empower teachers to meet the demands of bilingual education. Prema, Shanbal and Khurana (2011) points out that though bilingual education is prevalent in India, usage of nonnative language is usually restricted to school environment with a predominant use of native language for communication purpose. While it is widely accepted that teachers' language proficiency is so essential to either communicate or impart educational concept for bilingual children in the school set-up, there is an immense need for the system of education in India to gear-up to meet the requirements of bilingual and multilingual children. The Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (CIEFL) and Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) train upper primary and secondary teachers in English and Foreign languages. State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) of Kerala organized statewide training of higher secondary teachers and upper primary teachers. The training program also concentrated on various methods of teaching English from a communicative perspective. Such training programs for preschool teachers are very few in current scenario. Since the literacy skills are facilitated by oral language proficiency of children which in turn is influenced to a great extent by teachers proficiency, there is a need to study the English language proficiency of

preschool teachers. So, the current study aims to assess the English language proficiency of preschool teacher of South Kerala in India.

Objectives

1. To identify the overall English language proficiency of preschool teachers of Kerala
2. To compare the English language proficiency across reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Method

Participants

Twenty preschool teachers from five English medium schools of South Kerala (Alappuzha, Kollam, and Trivandrum) were selected through purposive sampling method. Age of the teachers ranged from 20-50yrs with a mean of 34. Inclusionary criteria for teachers were 1) teachers who have Malayalam as native language and learned English as second language during formal instruction, 2) minimum one year of experience in teaching preschool children and 3) teachers who had received training in teaching preschool children i.e. either B.Ed. or TTC.

Instrument

1. International Second Language Proficiency Rating Scale (ISLPR) (Ingrm, & Weiy, 2006), a standardized tool for assessing second language proficiency was used in the current study to assess the proficiency of preschool teachers in English. ISLPR has ratings from 0-5. Language proficiency is measured using 12 points from a continuum of 0-5 where '0' means zero proficiency(ZP), '0+' means Formulaic proficiency(FP), '1-' means Minimum creative proficiency (MCP), '1' means Basic transactional proficiency(BTP), '1+' means Transactional proficiency(TP), '2' means Basic social proficiency(BSP), '2+' Social proficiency(SP), '3' means Basic vocational proficiency(BVP), '3+' Basic vocational proficiency plus(BVP+), '4' means Vocational proficiency(VP), '4+' means Advanced vocational proficiency(AVP), '5' means Native like proficiency(NP). Proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing were assessed separately using this test.

Procedure

Purpose of the study and confidentiality of the data was discussed with the school authorities and teachers. Informed consent was taken from the participants. Participants were instructed to self-rate their proficiency in English language using ISLPR. Semi structured interview method was used for data collection. Testing was done individually in a quiet room in the school. A brief introduction about ISLPR was given to individual participant prior to it given for rating. Doubts regarding the scoring of questionnaire were clarified by the researcher if it was required.

Results

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and as the data was not following normal distribution non parametric test like Friedman test and Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted. Frequency distribution of the data shows that, out of the 20 teachers 70% of them have scored 2 in listening skills. This means that they have only basic social proficiency (BSP) in listening English language i.e. they can understand English when they are participating in conversation with a native speaker of English about a topic that is familiar to them. When the speaker is fast as well as when they are not involved in conversation they feel difficulty in listening and they need to pay more attention to the speaker. 25% of teachers scored 2+ i.e. Social profiles (SP) and the maximum scores given by teachers for listening skills was 2+.

For the speaking tasks, 40% scored 2 (BSP), 35% scored 1(BTP) and 25% scored 1+ (TP). In contrast to the listening skills proficiency in speaking was scattered from BTP to BSP. Maximum proficiency score in speaking was BSP i.e. they can take part in conversations related



to familiar events and things, but they may have problems with vocabulary and grammar. Whereas for reading skills all of them scored 3+ i.e. they have basic vocational proficiency plus (BVP+). They can read short popular novels for enjoyment, able to read complex texts like editorials with the help of dictionary. The proficiency for writing skills was scattered from 2+ to 3+. 45% of them scored basic vocational proficiency, 35% scored social proficiency and 20% scored basic vocational proficiency plus. Those in basic vocational proficiency can write their own opines and argument, but may lack the organization of matters.

Inferential statistics was done for comparison of performance across the four skills i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing. Non parametric Friedman Test was used for comparison of repeated measure shows a significant difference in performance across the skills ($\chi^2(3) = 8, p < .05$). Post hoc analysis was done using Wilcoxon signed rank test for pair wise comparison. Results in Table 1 reveal that there was significant difference in proficiency between all the skills except for writing versus reading ($Z(3, 20) = .905, p > .01$). This suggests that proficiency for reading and writing was not significantly different compared to other two skills speaking and listening.

Table 1

Comparison of proficiency across skills

Statistic	Speaking Listening	Reading Listening	Writing Listening	reading speaking	Writing Speaking	Writing Reading
Z	-3.640	-3.771	-3.116	-3.976	-3.921	-.905
Sig.	.000*	.000*	.002*	.000*	.000*	.366

* $p < .01$

Data was analyzed to find out the effect of years of experience on English proficiency of preschool teachers. The data shows a relatively poor proficiency by well experienced teachers as compared to less experienced teachers. But statistical analysis reveals no significant difference ($> .05$) in proficiency with the years of experience.

Discussion

Results of the current study revealed that preschool teachers exhibited varied level of proficiencies for listening, speaking and writing. The levels varied from basic transactional proficiency to basic vocational proficiency. Uniformity was observed in the proficiency rating on reading skills by preschool teachers wherein all the participants rated as having basic vocational proficiency plus i.e. they can understand complex texts like editorials. Based on the proficiency rating, higher level of proficiency was for reading, followed by writing, listening and speaking subsequently. Overall the proficiency was less than or equal to 3 for all skills. Preschool teachers in the current study were least proficient in speaking skills. As evidenced by many research oral language of children has an impact on the emergent literacy skills and which in turn influence later academic skills (Teale & Sulby, 1991; Whithurst & Lonigan, 1998). It has been recommended to include shared book reading, story telling etc in the practice of preschool teachers, so that oral language skills of preschool children can be facilitated. In order to accomplish this goal, preschool teachers should be proficient in English language especially in their speaking skills, for children who are attending English medium schools. However, the poor proficiency in speaking skills as rated by preschool teachers can be due to their lack of confidence also. They may have adequate knowledge in grammar and use of English language, but they may not be confident in speaking and listening English. This could be attributed to their own lack of exposure to English language in social context. This may lead to their lack of



confidence to teach English. As these less proficient teachers provide model for children, English language learners who receive poor teaching in English may develop basic interpersonal communication skills, but their L2 learning may not be fully developed to account for the cognitive and linguistic demands required for the better performance at higher grades. So, these children may face challenges in their education and may be diagnosed as at risk/disadvantaged children. As mentioned by Prema & Mekhala (2013) "Teacher should learn to 'play with children' and use language as a tool for empowerment". Proficient and excellent teachers can reduce the discrepancy in performance of children coming from various socio economic backgrounds. Hence, educational policy makers and government has to take necessary action into this matter. Also, if the dropout rates in schools have to be reduced, along with other factors the educational system in India should gear up to meet the requirements of bilingual education. We highlight the importance for teachers with limited levels of target language proficiency of continuing to develop their subject knowledge in order to maximize the language-learning experience for their students as well as meet the requirements of bilingual children.

Implications: In view of the above findings empowerment of in-service teachers has to be taken upto account for the increasing demands of bilingual education. Since teacher's proficiency in English language has a significant effect on children's literacy development, policy makers, researchers and administrators can plan for training programs for professional development of teachers to ensure the quality preschool instruction. The discrepancy in the demand vs. supply of quality educators in bilingual medium is an important issue to be seriously viewed. A large scale study with comparing teachers from rural and urban areas will give more insight to this issue.

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